

LAND SWAP

Nature would get short shrift in transfer of Stony Creek land

The proposed exchange of approximately 2,100 acres of land to create a buffer zone along the northern boundary of the Fort Indiantown Gap military reservation falls well short of a fair deal.

The Pennsylvania National Guard has yet to make a final decision, but it is proposing to take effective control of a seven-mile slice on the north side of Second Mountain in Stony Creek Valley that is part of the largest wilderness area in eastern Pennsylvania.

The Guard proposes to purchase land of equal size and quality surrounding the DeHart Reser-

voir in Clarks Valley owned by the City of Harrisburg and turn it over to the Pennsylvania Game Commis-

sion, which owns the land the Guard seeks. The property to be exchanged would be contiguous to the game lands.

The Guard says it needs the north side of Second Mountain as a precaution in the event shells fired parallel to the mountain from 120 mm tank guns on existing military property on the south side of Second Mountain ricochet over the top. Otherwise, it says, troops will have to travel to Fort Dix, N.J., or Fort Drum, N.Y., for practice firing.

We understand that live-fire training is a vital part of preparing for combat. But where do you draw the line in destroying the environment in the name of protecting the country?

Eastern Pennsylvania has been undergoing rapid development in

recent decades. There is not a lot of open space remaining. Certainly, nothing comparable exists on the scale to be found in and around Stony Valley. There is only one other roadless area in the entire state that is larger.

Originally known as St. Anthony's Wilderness, Stony Creek Valley served for a time as a coal-mining and tourist area. A railroad ran through the valley to Dauphin. Though scarred in places by man's activities, nature has nevertheless triumphed and the land — much of it in the hands of the game commission since 1945 — gradually returned to forest. It is now the haunt of bear, deer, wild turkey and song birds that thrive only in deep woods, as well as hunters, hikers, bird watchers and just plain lovers of the outdoors. A long stretch of the Appalachian Trail runs through here.

The land surrounding DeHart Reservoir is part of a protected watershed that helps ensure high-quality water for Harrisburg. It would be unthinkable that this land would ever be developed. So the Game Commission isn't really receiving anything that doesn't already exist in terms of wild acreage. The Guard plan, insofar as the reservoir land impacts the environment, represents nothing more than a change of ownership.

What would change is the land that the Game Commission would give up to the Guard. And once again, society would have found another excuse to shrink the ever-shrinking natural world. The Guard should come up with another solution that does not diminish this last remaining wilderness area in eastern Pennsylvania.

The Guard should find another solution that doesn't diminish this last wilderness